

# In Conversation: Farhang Rajaee

2001-02-22

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What is the human condition at the dawning of the global age? Drawing upon his own extensive experience, as well as upon the thoughts of Western and non-Western scholars and philosophers, Farhang Rajaee provides a fresh and critical inquiry into the nature of globalization.

*Globalization on Trial: The Human Condition and the Information Civilization* challenges the conventional view that equates globalization with the expansion of the capitalist economic system. With a broad historical and holistic brush, the author presents a view of globalization that is both multidisciplinary and multicultural. What opportunities must we seize? What dangers must we overcome? Dr Rajaee examines human governance and the paradox of globalism and nationalism. *IDRC Reports Online* recently interviewed Dr Rajaee about *Globalization on Trial*:

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## Why did you write this book? Who is your intended audience?

As a teacher, I am always concerned about the student body, the new generation, which is confronted with new challenges and new issues. So it all began as a way of formulating a curriculum for university students who are interested in understanding globalization. And since it began with the idea of a curriculum, the finished product has that shape. It was written as a way of laying down the issues. But as I was looking through the literature, I noticed that the general reader could enjoy it, because I try to avoid jargon as much as possible.

## Are you optimistic or pessimistic about how globalization will unfold?

I think neither. Globalization is a human phenomenon. As human beings we have the potential of doing good or doing bad, and thus whatever we create has the same capacity. So I have tried to be realistic and show the complexity of the real issues. More often than not we fall into the trap of glorification or vilification, which I think doesn't serve any purpose unless you are politically motivated, unless you have a particular interest [to promote].

**One view of globalization is that Western materialism is spreading and homogenizing the world, but you reject that idea. Why?**

I think that is a one dimensional look at globalization. It is a reductionist approach and reduces a complex phenomenon to a simple thing. [The concept of] 'economic triumphalism' or the 'religion of the market' doesn't help much. It is interesting that Coca Cola is spreading everywhere but not in China very well. Why? Because it cannot beat tea in the region. It's not [rooted in local culture]. And so all globalized products, unless they are localized in some fashion, will not take root.

In my part of the world, Iran, the device which keeps things cool or warm — a thermos — is called a Coleman. It was only after I came to Canada that I discovered it's the name of a company which makes the thermos. So therefore it has been localized that way. [Similarly], what you use here for one purpose, other people may use for another purpose. It may not be used in the way it was originally used in its place of origin. So I don't think globalization can easily be called homogenization. However, there are a lot of common standards, or forms of standardization, by which we do things.

**One area where you see standardization is language. You suggest that a universal language (such as English) might emerge, which people use as an operating language.**

A lot of people are afraid of the hegemony of the English language — that it is destroying the culture and so on. But in *Globalization on Trial*, I use the example of the Muslim case. During the time of globalization when Muslims dominated [the world] all the way from China to North Africa, they all used the medium of Arabic as the medium of culture, civilization, interaction, administration, politics — and yet there were such diverse forms of culture. I was making the argument that the closest you can get to a homogenization of culture with the globalization process is [a common] language. And even there, historically, one can talk about the Islamic case in which different languages survived.

A counter-argument could be made however, that the pervasiveness of technology and the comprehensive aspect of this new 21st Century culture, the culture of market, is not comparable to some of those earlier agrarian modes of production. It is true that there was this overwhelming comprehensive ideology called Islam in the various parts of the Muslim world. But it did not have the media, it did not have the instruments of technology, to force its homogenization.

But as the Canadian Professor of International Relations at the University of Toronto, Dr Thomas Homer-Dixon, asks in his new book, *The Ingenuity Gap*: Are we ignoring human ingenuity? Are we viewing human beings as merely objects manipulated by technology, or are they agents? I am sure there are a lot of people who would rather be objects. At the same time, I am sure there are a lot of people who refuse to be. And I'm not being elitist. I am talking about ordinary human beings who spend hours and hours in the middle of the night at the computer, versus those who demonstrate in front of the World Bank or in Seattle. These are ordinary people. Human beings are intelligent enough to know when something is making them passive and they will resist it.

**You also reject Harvard University Professor Samuel Huntington's paradigm of the clash of civilizations. Can you explain?**

To me, it is a contradiction in terms to say that civilizations clash. Because if they are civilized, they can't. A civilized person settles differences through civilized means. So do civilizations. Civilizations do not intervene. They have respect for boundaries. They don't interfere in each other's affairs. If they do, they are really empires. Conquerors or empires simply have a desire to

conquer, they set the rules as they go along whereas civilizations operate within relatively accepted rules of the game.

So I really think that what Huntington is talking about [in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*] is the power game, which was played by superpowers prior to the coming of the new information civilization. He identifies seven power blocks, but he calls them civilizations. That is my bone of contention with him. He doesn't use the term civilization properly.

**You propose a new paradigm: one civilization of many civilizations — a kind of unity in diversity. Can you elaborate?**

I don't think this is very new. At the peak of Greek Civilization, Aristotle identified close to 150 cities or polis. Are these 150 communities the same? Not at all. We know the way the Athenians conducted themselves was very different from the Spartans or Corinthians. The Athenians demonstrated a democratic tendency, Spartans displayed a militaristic tendency, Corinthians displayed an economic tendency. But all were living under the general framework of Greek civilization, the Greek pattern of thinking.

There is also the example of the Muslim civilization, a Muslim frame of thinking. But was the population in the Arabian peninsula culturally the same as people in North Africa? Not at all, everyone had their own culture. Perhaps [*Globalization on Trial*] should have used the phrase one civilization, many cultures. That would have been more accurate. I think if one was to make a very important correction to my paradigm, it would state one civilization, many cultures.

Here is the optimistic part. Maybe there is a potential, in this globalization process, which would allow for one civilization taking over and all of us operating that way. We write papers the same way, we do our business the same way, hence a standardization of the mode of production. But at another level, we all have our own culture within the one civilization.

***Globalization on Trial* emphasizes the need for tolerance and acceptance of differences. How might we achieve this in North America where there is a notion that the West is right?**

Part of this self-righteousness comes from the fact that [the West] is in a position of power. I think this is a common human phenomenon. Why did the Greeks call the others barbarians? Why did the Indians call those who didn't like their system untouchables? All other societies have this notion of self-righteousness. I think self-righteousness is a human phenomenon, recognizing that it may not be very conducive to having a better human life. It's not really good for you.

Self-righteousness is different from having pride. The border between pride and self-righteousness is very, very tiny. To have pride is human, but to be self-righteous is another thing. I hope that due to speed, technology, our busy life, and so on, we don't lose sight of the fact that we have to handle others with care. Caring may suffer from globalization.

But there is something to be optimistic about. I can click here on the Internet and can easily look at the face, the mode of thinking, or the presentation of a fellow from the Philippines, from Timbuktu, or from North Yemen. While I am doing a search for something else, I sometimes stop and read another fellow's website. The Internet gives you access [to other cultures].

**Your book suggests the need for some form of global governance, but rejects the idea of a cosmopolitan democracy. What form might it take instead?**

It's not a global government, but global governance that we need. Global government assumes that there is some body that can govern us. What I suggest is that global governance is a necessity for the future. You have to recognize that a lot of issues of our human community cannot be dealt with by local governments or regional governments — such as climate change and other environmental issues. They require a more universal effort. I don't think we should concentrate on the person or institutions that should address these issues, but concentrate on what needs to be done.

How do we get it done? We should take a common crisis management approach to global governance. There are things that states know have to be done, but they can't do it themselves so they develop international agencies, such as the World Health Organization and UNESCO.

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## **The Author**

**Farhang Rajaee** is a Visiting Associate Professor at the College of the Humanities, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. In 1984, he served on the Iranian UN delegation and, from 1985 to 1996, was a professor at the University of Tehran, the Iranian Academy of Philosophy, and Beheshti (National) University. In 1990 and 1991, Professor Rajaee was a fellow at Oxford University. His book *Ma'rekeye Jahanbiniha* (The Battle of World Views, *Ehya Ketab*, 1995 and 1997) established his reputation as an interpreter of Islamic movements and political Islam.

## **The Book**

[Globalization on Trial: The Human Condition and the Information Civilization](#)

by Farhang Rajaee, IDRC/Kumarian 2000